

WASHINGTON, DC –Rep. Peter DeFazio's (D-Springfield) legislation to protect and expand the Oregon Caves National Monument passed out of the House Natural Resources Committee today. The legislation transfers approximately 4,070 acres of Forest Service managed land to the existing 480 acre Oregon Caves National Monument and designates the River Styx –the underground stream running through Oregon Caves- as the first subterranean Wild and Scenic River in the nation.

“Oregon Caves is one of the most geologically unique places in the entire state of Oregon. For Oregonians, visiting and touring the caves has become a family tradition. Expanding the monument will help provide long-term protection of the monument, increase public recreational opportunities, attract tourists, and provide economic development opportunities for Cave Junction and the Illinois Valley,” said Congressman DeFazio.

Expanding the monument to include the Lake Creek watershed will give the National Park Service (NPS) management responsibilities over the water resources that have a direct impact on the monument's water supply (which serves 80,000 people annually) and the Caves' ecosystem.

The legislation also provides for the voluntary donation of grazing permits within the monument to be permanently retired by the National Park Service. Grazing in the watershed has caused water quality problems, including contamination of the Monument's drinking water supply. The current grazing permittee, Phil Krouse, has already agreed to sell his grazing privileges within the monument.

The 4,070 acre expansion will be managed as a National Preserve, which will allow the National Park Service to conduct responsible forest restoration and hazardous fuel reduction activities to prevent fire. Hunting, fishing, and trapping would also be allowed on the preserve in accordance with applicable federal and state laws.

According to the city of Cave Junction, the economic development strategy of the Illinois Valley is tourism, and the Oregon Caves is the largest tourist draw in the area. More than 80,000 tourists visit Oregon Caves each year. Visitors generate hundreds of thousands of dollars in direct and indirect economic activity in the local economy. A recent survey completed by the National Park Service indicated that visitors would stay longer and visit more often if recreational opportunities around the Oregon Caves were expanded.

Oregon Caves is the longest marble cave (3.5 miles) open to the public west of the Continental Divide. Recent discoveries indicate that Oregon Caves possesses a significant collection of Pleistocene fossils, including jaguar and grizzly bear. Grizzly bones that were found in the cave in 1995 were estimated to be at least 50,000 years old, the oldest known from either North or South America. The Oregon Caves National Monument also includes the Oregon Caves Chateau, which is one of the National Park system's Great Lodges and a National Historic Landmark. The six-story hotel located on the monument has a fine dining room, a 1930's era coffee shop, and 23 rooms.

The NPS has formally proposed to expand the boundary of the Monument to encompass several other caves, as well as the surrounding Cave Creek Watershed numerous times, first in 1939, again in 1949, and most recently in 1999.

DeFazio's legislation must now be passed by the U.S. Senate before being signed into law by the president.